

*Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 97*

# Sayings and Parables

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*Various Authors*



**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

# Sayings and Parables

by



**Various Authors**

**Buddhist Publication Society  
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# Foreword

**T**

he Buddha often taught in concrete terms, and his discourses abound in images, similes, and parables which translate the profound truths of the Dhamma into the familiar facts of everyday life. These devices arouse interest and facilitate understanding. They make the principles to be taught strong and vivid in their impact on those to whom they are addressed and provide an impetus to apply them in practice. It is one of the marvels of the Buddha's method of exposition that there is hardly an aspect of human life which is not made to serve as a means for illustrating his teaching.

The present brief selection of Buddhist sayings and parables is intended to provide a sampling of the Buddha's concrete way of teaching. The selection is taken from the book "The Teaching of Buddha" (133<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed., 1980), published by the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai (Buddhist Promoting Foundation) of Japan. This book was compiled for the purpose of promoting the practice of Buddhism through a compact anthology of Buddhist texts reflecting the spirit of Japanese Buddhism. Its numerous brief selections draw from the scriptures of various Buddhist

traditions, both Theravada and Mahayana. Some of the sayings taken for the present booklet are from selections based on Mahayana sources, but the principles they teach can readily be understood in terms of the general Buddhist tradition.

The Buddhist Promoting Foundation, which publishes the original in a bilingual English-Japanese edition, distributes it in the noble hope of seeing “a day come soon when as many homes as possible will have this book and as many as possible of our fellow men will enjoy and bathe in the light of the Great Teacher.” The BPS hopes to contribute to the fulfilment of this aim with the present small anthology. Copies of the original may be obtained by writing to:

Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai  
3-14 Shiba 4-Chome  
Minato-ku  
Tokyo, Japan

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## **Sayings and Parables**

# Human Life

There is an allegory that depicts human life.

Once there was a man rowing a boat down a river. Someone on the shore warned him, "Stop rowing so gaily down the swift current; there are rapids ahead and a dangerous whirlpool and there are crocodiles and demons lying in wait in rocky caverns. You will perish if you continue."

In this allegory, "the swift current" is a life of lust; "rowing gaily" is giving rein to one's passions; "rapids ahead" means the ensuing suffering and pain; "whirlpool" means pleasure; "crocodiles and demons" refers to the decay and death that follow a life of lust and indulgence; "someone on the shore" who calls out is Buddha.

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Here is another allegory.

A man who has committed a crime is running away; the guards are following him, so he tries to hide himself by descending into a well by means of some vines growing down the sides. As he descends, he sees vipers at the bottom of the well, so he decides to cling to the vine for safety. After a time when his arms get

tired, he notices two mice, one white and the other black, gnawing at the vine.

If the vine breaks, he will fall to the vipers and perish. Suddenly, on looking upward, he notices just above his face a bee-hive from which occasionally falls a drop of honey. Forgetting all the dangers, the man tastes the honey with delight.

"A man" means the one who is born to suffer and to die alone. "Guards" and "vipers" refer to the body with all its desires. "Vines" means the continuity of life. "Two mice, one white and the other black" refer to the duration of time, days and nights, and the passing years.

"Honey" indicates the physical pleasures that beguile the suffering of the passing years.

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Here is still another allegory.

A king places four vipers in a box and gives the box into the keeping of a servant. He commands the servant to take good care of them and warns that if he angers even one of them, he will be punished with death. The servant, in fear, decides to throw away the box and escape.

The king sends five guards to capture the servant.

At first they approach the servant in a friendly manner, intending to take him back safely, but the servant does not trust their friendliness and escapes to another village.

Then, in a vision, a voice tells him that in this village there is no safe shelter, and that there are six bandits who will attack him, so the servant runs away in fright until he comes to a wild river that blocks his way. Thinking of the dangers that are following him, he makes a raft and succeeds in crossing the turbulent current, beyond which he finally finds safety and peace.

“Four vipers in a box” indicate the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air that make up the body of flesh. The body is given into the charge of lust and is an enemy of the mind. Therefore he tries to run away from the body.

“Five guards who approach in a friendly manner” mean the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, volition and consciousness—which frame body and mind.

“The safe shelter” is the six senses, which are no safe shelter at all, and “the six bandits” are the six objects of the six senses. Thus, seeing the dangers within the six senses, he runs away once more and comes to the wild current of worldly desires.

Then he makes himself a raft of the Buddha's good teachings and crosses the wild current safely.

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In a thicket at the foot of the Himalayan Mountains there once lived a parrot together with many other animals and birds. One day a fire started in the thicket from the friction of bamboos in a strong wind, and the birds and animals were in frightened confusion. The parrot, feeling compassion for their fright and suffering, and wishing to repay the kindness he had received in the bamboo thicket where he could shelter himself, tried to do all he could to save them. He dipped himself in a pond nearby and flew over the fire and shook off the drops of water to extinguish the fire. He repeated this diligently with a heart of compassion out of gratitude to the thicket.

This spirit of kindness and self-sacrifice was noticed by a heavenly god who came down from the sky and said to the parrot: "You have a gallant mind, but what good do you expect to accomplish by a few drops of water against this great fire?" The parrot answered: "There is nothing that cannot be accomplished by the spirit of gratitude and self-sacrifice. I will try over and over again and then over again in the next life." The great god was impressed by the parrot's spirit, and together they extinguished the fire.



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At one time there lived in the Himalayas a bird with one body and two heads. Once one of the heads noticed the other head eating some sweet fruit and felt jealous and said to itself: "I will then eat poison fruit." So it ate the poisonous fruit, and the whole bird died.

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Once there was a wealthy but foolish man. When he saw the beautiful three-storied house of another man, he envied it and made up his mind to have one built just like it, thinking he was himself just as wealthy. He called a carpenter and ordered him to build it. The carpenter consented and immediately began to construct the foundation, the first story, the second story, and then the third story. The wealthy man noticed this with irritation and said: "I don't want a foundation or a first story or a second story; I just want the beautiful third story. Build it quickly."

A foolish man always thinks only of the results, and is impatient without the effort that is necessary to get good results. No good can be attained without proper effort, just as there can be no third story without the foundation and the first and second stories.

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A foolish man was once boiling honey. His friend suddenly appeared and the foolish man wanted to offer him some honey, but it was too hot, and so without removing it from the fire, he fanned it to cool it. In like manner, it is impossible to get the honey of cool wisdom without first removing the fire of worldly passions.

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There is no one way to get free from the trap of worldly passions. Suppose you caught a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a fox and a monkey, six creatures of very different nature, and you tie them together with a strong rope and let them go. Each of these six creatures will try to go back to its own lair by its own method: the snake will seek a covering of grass, the crocodile will seek water, the bird will want to fly in the air, the dog will seek a village, the fox will seek the solitary ledges, and the monkey will seek the trees of a forest. In the attempt of each to go its own way there will be a struggle, but being tied together by a rope, the strongest at any one time will drag the rest. Like the six creatures in this parable, man is tempted in different ways by the desires of his six senses: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, touch and brain, and is controlled by the predominant desire.

If the six creatures are all tied to a post, they will try

to get free until they are tired out, and then will lie down by the post. Just like this, if people will train and control the mind, there will be no further trouble from the other five senses. If the mind is under control, people will have happiness both now and in the future.

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Here is another allegory.

Once there were two demons who spent a whole day arguing and quarrelling about a box, a cane, and a pair of shoes. A man passing by inquired, “Why are you arguing about these things? What magical power have they that you should be quarrelling about possessing them?”

The demons explained to him that from the box they could get anything they desired—food, clothing or treasure; with the cane they could subdue all their enemies; and with the pair of shoes they could travel through the air.

Upon hearing this, the man said, “Why quarrel? If you will go away for a few minutes, I can think of a fair division of the things between you.” So the two demons retired and as soon as they were gone, the man put on the shoes, seized the box and the cane and was off through the air.

The “demons” represent men of false beliefs. “A box” means the gifts that are made in charity; they do not realize how many treasures can be produced from charity. “A cane” means the practice of concentration of mind. Men do not realize that by the practice of spiritual concentration of mind, they can subdue all worldly desires. “A pair of shoes” means the pure disciplines of thought and conduct that will carry them beyond all desires and arguments. Without knowing these, they quarrel and argue about a box, a cane, and a pair of shoes.

\*\*\*

Once a beautiful and well-dressed woman visited a house. The master of the house asked her who she was, and she replied that she was the goddess of wealth. The master of the house was delighted and so treated her nicely.

Soon after, another woman appeared who was ugly and poorly dressed. The master asked her who she was, and the woman replied that she was the goddess of poverty. The master was frightened and tried to drive her out of the house, but the woman refused to depart, saying, “The goddess of wealth is my sister. There is an agreement between us that we are never to live separately; if you chase me out, she is to go with me.” Sure enough, as soon as the ugly woman left, the

other woman disappeared.

Birth goes with death. Fortune goes with misfortune. Bad things follow good things. Men should realize this. Foolish people dread misfortune and strive after good fortune, but those who seek Enlightenment must transcend both of them and be free of worldly attachments.

## **Marriage**

The relation of husband and wife is not designed merely for their convenience. It has a deeper significance than the mere association of two physical bodies in one house. Husband and wife should take advantage of the intimacies of their association to help each other in training their minds in the Buddha's teachings.

An old couple, an "ideal couple," as they were called, once came to the Buddha and said, "Lord, we were married after we had been acquainted in childhood, and there has never been a cloud in our happiness. Please tell us if we can be remarried in the next life."

The Buddha gave them this wise answer: "If you

both have exactly the same faith, if you both received the teaching in exactly the same way, if you perform charity in the same way, and if you have the same wisdom, then you will have the same mind in the next birth.”

## **Family Life**

A family is a place where minds come in contact with one another. If these minds love one another, the home will be as beautiful as a flower garden. But if these minds get out of harmony with one another, it is like a storm that plays havoc with the garden.

If discord arises within one’s family, one should not blame others but should examine one’s own mind and follow a right path.

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Discordant minds often bring disaster. A trifling misunderstanding may be followed by great misfortune. This is especially to be guarded against in family life.

## **The Life of Women**

There are no distinctions of sex on the path to Enlightenment. If a woman makes up her mind to seek Enlightenment, she will become a heroine of the True Path.

Mallikā, the daughter of King Pasenadi and the Queen of King Ayodhya, was such a heroine. She had great faith in the teaching of the Blessed One and made the ten following vows in his presence:

“My Lord, until I gain Enlightenment, I will not violate the sacred precepts; I will not be arrogant before people who are older than myself; I will not become angry with anyone.

“I will not be jealous of others or envy their possessions; I will not be selfish either in mind or property; I will try to make poor people happy with the things I receive and will not hoard them for myself.

“I will receive all people courteously, give them what they need, and speak kindly to them; consider their circumstances and not my convenience: and try to benefit them without partiality.

“If I see others in solitude, in prison, or suffering from disease or other troubles, I will try to relieve them and make them happy by explaining the reasons and laws to them.

“If I see others catching living animals and being cruel to them or violating any such precept, I will punish them if they are to be punished, or teach them if they are to be taught, and then I will try to undo what they have done and correct their mistakes, to the best of my ability.

“I will not forget to hear the right teaching, for I know that when one neglects the right teaching one quickly falls away from the truth that abides everywhere, and will fail to reach the shore of Enlightenment.”

Then she made the following three wishes to save poor people:

“First, I will try to make everyone peaceful. This wish, I believe, in whatever life I may receive hereafter, will be the root of goodness that will grow into the wisdom of good teaching.

“Second, after I have received the wisdom of good teaching, I will untiringly teach all people.

“Third, I will protect the true teaching, even at the sacrifice of my own body, life or property.”

The true significance of family life is the opportunity it gives for mutual encouragement and aid on the path to Enlightenment. Even an ordinary woman, if she has the same mind to seek



Enlightenment, and makes the same vows and wishes, may become as great a disciple of Buddha as Mallikā was.

## **The Harmony of Society**

Let us imagine a desert country lying in absolute darkness with many living things swarming blindly about in it.

Naturally they will be frightened, and as they run about without recognizing one another during the night, there will be frequent squirming and loneliness. It is indeed a pitiable sight

Then let us imagine that suddenly a superior man with a torch appears, and everything around becomes bright and clear.

The living beings in the dark solitude suddenly air a great relief as they look about to recognize one another and happily share their companionship.

By a “desert country” is meant a world of human life when it lies in the darkness of ignorance. Those who have no light of wisdom in their minds wander about in loneliness and fear. They were born alone and die alone; they do not know how to associate with

their fellow men in peaceful harmony, and they are naturally despondent and fearful.

By “a superior man with a torch” is meant Buddha assuming a human form, and by his wisdom and companion he illumines the world.

In this light people find themselves as well as others and are glad to establish human fellowship and harmonious relations.

Thousands of people may live in a community, but it is not one of real fellowship until they know each other mutually and have sympathy for one another.

A true community has faith and wisdom that illuminate it. It is a place where the people know and trust one another and where there is social harmony.

In fact, harmony is the life and real purpose of a true community or an organization.

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Blood stains cannot be removed by more blood; resentment cannot be removed by more resentment; resentment can be removed only by forgetting it.

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A pure mind soon becomes a deep mind, a mind that

is commensurate with the Noble Path, a mind that loves to give, a mind that loves to keep the precepts, an enduring mind, a zealous mind, a calm mind, a wise mind, a compassionate mind, a mind that leads people to Enlightenment by many and skilful means. Thus shall the Buddha's land be built.

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Indeed, earnestness and faithfulness in spreading the teaching of the Dhamma are what build the Buddha Land.

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As the light of a small candle will spread from one to another in succession, so the light of Buddha's compassion will pass on from one mind to another endlessly.

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Lay followers should always remember that the reason they believe in the three treasures and keep the precepts is to enable themselves ultimately to attain Enlightenment, and for that reason they should, though living in the world of desires, avoid becoming attached to such desires.

Lay followers should always keep in mind that sooner or later they will be obliged to part with their parents and families and pass away from this life of birth and death; therefore, they should not become attached to things of this life but should set their minds on the world of Enlightenment, wherein nothing passes away.

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The mind of faith is pure and gentle, always patient and enduring, never arguing, never causing suffering to others but always pondering the three treasures—the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Thus happiness spontaneously rises in their minds, and the light for Enlightenment can be found everywhere.

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Those who follow the teaching of Buddha, because they understand that everything is characterized by “non-substantiality,” do not treat lightly the things that enter into a man’s life, but they receive them for what they are and then try to make them fit for Enlightenment.

They must not think that this world is meaningless and filled with confusion while the world of Enlightenment is full of meaning and peace. Rather,

they should taste the way of Enlightenment in all affairs of this world.

\*\*\*

Blossoms come about because of a series of conditions that lead up to their blooming; leaves are blown away because a series of conditions lead up to it. Blossoms do not appear unconditioned, nor does a leaf fall of itself. So everything has its coming forth and passing away; nothing can be independent without any change.

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It is the everlasting and unchanging rule of this world that everything is created by a series of causes and conditions and disappears by the same rule: everything changes—nothing remains without change.

Suppose a log is floating in a river. If the log does not become grounded, or sinks, or is not taken out by man, or does not decay, ultimately it will reach the sea. Life is like this log caught in the current of a great river. If a person does not become attached to a life of self-indulgence, or, by renouncing life, does not become attached to a life of self-torture; if a person does not become proud of his virtues or does not

become attached to his evil acts; if in his search for Enlightenment he does not become contemptuous of delusion or fear it; such a person is following the Middle Way.

The important thing in following the path to Enlightenment is to avoid being caught and entangled in any extreme—that is, always to follow the Middle Way.

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